Psychopomp

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Summary

Will Graham is an empath and a seer. Hannibal Lecter has a thousand shadows, the ghosts of those he has devoured.

(Together they fight crime).

UNFINISHED/DEAD FIC.

Notes

For thetruthyness , saucefactory and triffidsandcuckoos who discussed a Magical Realism AU on tumblr that inspired me.

Chapter 1

Violence has a taste.

It's not something that's easy to explain to others. Not to normal people, not to his students or to the various members of the Bureau he has known in the past. For all the many and myriad talents, traits and tricks, inborn and learned and happened-upon that at this point in the history of the world are almost a requirement of law enforcement, this particular gift (curse is more accurate, but they find him too useful to let him speak that truth) of his is still rare. True empathy, they call it. Not mind-reading, no simple surface-skimming always too foreign to assign real meaning. He is a blank slate, an empty vessel, waiting to be filled up by what others leave behind.

He wears gloves whenever outside the familiarity of his own home. Even so most crime-scenes are enough to send him choking, filling his throat with bitterness, rotting meat and coffee grounds and sharp musk. Emotion so strong imprints itself into the very air. When he lets it in the clock flicks back and he finds himself alien, a watchful presence cradling another's mind. Passion oozes into him, like falling into darkness.

It's easy after that to go through the motions, shadowing what he has now done before, explaining himself as he goes. The fevered logic, the sexual or near-sexual satisfaction. The many motives, sometimes banal, rarely unique. He is blind to the watchful eyes of others, always wary, the little moments of fear that appear sharp as shattered glass in the shifting of a stance, the turning of a head whenever he is around. In the ghost of the past they no longer exist.

However much he absorbs the spoor of the horrible however, he can never reconstitute it into something others can truly comprehend. For all his examples in the lecture halls of the Academy, all he can use are the dry words of academia, plain photographs, arcane diagrams dredged up from scores of old works. He has felt the powers of others written and rewritten on the palimpsest inside his skull, which makes him a natural choice for teaching, yet he can never explain *himself*.

It's strange really, almost a joke, that for all the other people that he has had inside his head (and not *all* of them monsters, despite that most of them are) it doesn't make being around them any easier. Or perhaps not so strange. He does not *like* people. He does not like how much he knows about them. He does not like seeing so much. Hence the gloves; else with every handshake he would become no more than a mirror, constantly warping into someone else.

Jack Crawford, leader and currently head-hunter for the Behavioural Studies Unit, is not a mirror, nor someone Will would particularly like to reflect. His affable manner belies the strength that lies at his fingertips, the runes tattooed across the back of his hands, the old scars and more recent wounds that pattern palms and wrists. He is a man of good intentions – Will needs no more than glances to see that – and good at what he does as well. And it seems he has need of an empath.

There is no harm in accepting his request. If he is to be constantly at the mercy of the peculiarities of his own brain, the least he can do is to use if for good. He has tried locking himself away from the world before and found that world so narrowed becoming cloying, stifling, the mirror reflecting back upon itself in an endless parade of feverish dreams of things felt before. It is better when at least there are new terrors to make him sweat at night, rather than the same old ones constantly repeated in new and worse variations. He has found in his current post a kind of equilibrium.

The missing corpses of this new case are not so out of the ordinary. The uses of the dead are many and manifold, black magic being a way that contains within it many paths to power. There are darker things lurking in the shadows of the world than many would like to consider or acknowledge. Sacrifice, consumption, the rendering into parts for spells and potions... But this does not have quite that sense about it. This is not impersonal. These girls are important to their killer. Representative of something he loves and longs for. A sacrament.

The house of the most recent victim is heavy with the rose-petal perfume of love but beneath is the subtle scent of decay. A cat watches him unblinking from the foot of the stair, and when he makes to approach it guides him upwards, knowing. It scratches at the door, pawing. Dark shadows spill out from the crack underneath in a parody of light. Will breaths in. The visions are back.

Not hallucinations, although he once thought that might be so. They come in the small hours of the night, or when he is worn, or tired, or burdened with stress. Or when the world (or some unexplained power he does not know or understand) seems trying to tell him something. Visions are thought to be the preserve of shamans, oracles and prophets, or else conjured only with much preparation and ritual. He is, has done, none of the above. He does not know what it means that he sees such things.

He gives the cat to the father to hold, a protection against the death that lies beyond the threshold, and enters. The girl, Elise, is lying in still repose, perfect but for the small blossoms of wounds upon her torso. He can see her soul (a preserve of these in-between moments, these vision-times that can last for days or weeks or, rarely, longer). It flutters unhappily around her body. She has not been dead long enough for it to leave.

Crawford is gentle with him before he is left alone to take in the scene. He is given the freedom to approach it in his own way, and the promise of solitude away from those who so quickly become frightened of him and what he takes into himself. He can tell that the murder happened here. There is more than one ghost, and only one is dead. He stands where the other stood and opens himself up. Feels shuddering, grasping, hungry love, consuming love. Feels a man acting in fear. Feels the raw need that must be quieted by any means.

And then, suddenly, interrupted. For a moment he looks up with a monster’s eyes. But the woman is not the echo of his prey and so he shatters apart and reforms as himself. She is talking, too fast, too friendly, too familiar. He is badly off balance, stammers answers, tries to regain his feet. For a long moment the woman has the face of a fox. Then there are others, Crawford, another man, and it all ebbs and seeps away, and sharp-edged normality brushes aside the cobwebs of a fever dream. He is left with his conclusions which he carefully explains.

After, when he is no longer needed, he is permitted to go home.

That night the visions come again. By this point he has already adopted another half-wild guardian into his pack, but the door to the otherworldly still opens no matter how many watchers he has gathered to stand by the gate. Elise rises out of his reach, her side soaked in blood, on her back with her limbs hanging like a sacrifice laid out over a sacred stone. Life drips from her and lands on him like rain on hungry earth. It is soaked up and gone. He wakes sweating. For him sleep is always elusive, broken by fears and illusions and metaphors given flesh. They are the terrors of his memories, or else they hold some subtle truth. The latter never make sense to him, but that does not stop them coming. He exists in a constant state of insomnia. Inhabiting the power of true empathy as he does, reality never seems truly real.

There are more dreams when he slips back under, but (a strange mercy) he does not remember them.

Crawford is less patient with him next morning, pressing for answers in an Academy bathroom the red of arterial blood. There are fresh cuts hidden beneath bandages just visible at the cuffs of his shirt; he has been looking for answers in other places and has found none. Will bears it as well as he can. He has the morning for his lectures before he must attend the autopsy of Elise, perhaps open himself up to her shade in hope it might retain some shadowed memory of the killer's face.

When he arrives the vulpine woman, Katz, is there with her spirit guide padding at her heels. The other lab techs are Zeller, who bears magi tattoos similar to those Crawford wears, albeit less advanced, and Price, whose skin ripples with the unreal phantoms of animal hides. He is a shape-changer, though Will would not see it at other times. Now he penetrates more deeply. They continue their work with little regard for his presence – outwardly, but he is not blind, he does not miss their wariness. They speak of little magics, tracking spells for the scrap of pipe, workings to glean some speck of knowledge from skin and hair and cloth.

The ghost of Elise watches, subtle as smoke. Will does not have to open himself much to feel her melancholy, her sorrow. Speech fades into murmur as the black shadows of the plastic body-bag catch his gaze, and the girl's spectre caresses him as the apparition, half vision, half empathic taint, blossoms into existence in the dark.

The antlers spring from her like fast-growing fungus, slicked with blood that also stains the purity of her dress in brilliant rosettes. She looks at him and pleads. This close to all that remains of her, he slips into a mind ripe with the gasping need for air as she, or he, is strangled, pinned down, suffocated.

He rips himself away with an effort, shattering the container of his mind to let the ghost drain away. "She was mounted on them," he says, as the dregs of the killer's mind he captured before echo within his words. "Like hooks. She may have been bled."

They see the liver then, cut and replaced. For a moment they take it (wrongly, once more) as botched black magic, a failure to fulfil whatever narrow criteria the arcane objective required. He corrects them quickly.

“There was something wrong with the meat.”

Consumption. Cannibalism. It is sometimes odd, how even murderers who gladly take dark paths will balk from that act. Taboos even they will not defy. This man takes these girls into himself, makes them a part of him, absorbs their very essence. Even had anything remained of the others, there would be no ghosts for them. He must own them, that they never escape.

He loves so deeply he must devour.

A day or two later he wakes from dreams of raw flesh, sticky and fresh and torn from the bone with a predator’s teeth. His heart beats like a drum in his ears, like something wild and feral. The taste of blood is still in his mouth. When he walks into Jack Crawford’s office that morning he meets Hannibal Lecter for the first time.

He is (it dawns on him right away that it is camouflage) a vision in beige, tall, pale, with dark eyes and a face that could only be called striking. Crawford introduces him, a psychologist here to help profile their cannibal. There is something about him that puts Will on edge, something he cannot quite define. There is some indefinable power about him, but that is not odd if he has been judged fit by the Bureau. When the light hits him, that man’s eyes seem to glow red.

Will could try and slip inside his head if he wanted, envelop him in empathy, but his curiosity is not enough to break long habit. It can be easy to get lost, if the other mind is still close by.

They exchange words, too sharp-edged for banter, too personal for professional interest. When he makes eye contact he is for a moment startled at how little he can see there. How much lurks, hidden, in deep depths. It does not take long to discern Jack’s real intent in bringing the man here. An empath is a danger. He must be analysed, corralled. Weighed and measured and perhaps fixed, if some way could be found to do so. Will knows there is none. He knows his own mind with the precision of one who would have been lost long ago if he did not. Even now it can be difficult to hold on, and he sometimes thinks he changes a little more with each new mind he takes into himself.

Still, angry, he leaves. Lecter is curious, but not so curious that he will let him into his head. There is too much darkness there. There is a reason why he is feared. Better Crawford not see it. He has it under control.

For a moment he thinks the tableau to be another vision. It has that same surreal quality. But it does not move and it does not leave, and eventually he must acknowledge it to be real. But it is not right. It does not fit the pattern. There is no love in this. There is nothing at all, no

emotional spoor to perfume the air save some distant trace of disgust like the aftertaste of vomit. This is not their killer, their ‘Shrike’.

The mind here is slippery and hard to envelop. It has not felt deeply enough to imprint the air. Still he tries, gets little glimpses, the satisfaction of a predator, and hunger too. He does not need to get more of this murderer to know he has eaten of the victim. She is empty and hollow, and for a moment he sees her as shrivelled as a mummy, dried up of all her essence.

Whoever devoured this woman did not do it from a place of respect, from love. He did not want to keep some sliver of her close to his heart. He wanted to destroy her, and in so doing make all her strength his. And yet, for all that this is so very, very different to those who have come before, to Elise and all those others, it is different in the way the negative of film mirrors the true image. With clarity he dredges up the mind of the Shrike and understands that self better.

The insights come rolling from his mouth for Crawford and the others to hear. This is another step upon the road to catching their cannibal, and there is some dark part of him that almost wants to thank this cold, strange, psychopath for making it possible.

Who is this copycat?

There is another vision that night. While the cleansing waters of the shower soak him his eyes look out upon a different realm. In the forest depths the creature waits for him, chimerical thing of stag and crow, prey and predator, virile life and scavenging death. It watches him and beckons. Blood drips from the arcing tines of its antlers. He makes to follow it, but it bursts into a crowd of dark wings and is gone.

Lecter visits him in the morning with food and polite requests for entry. Not that Will thinks he is vampyr, for aside all else it is day and the sun is out. It is more likely that, being European, he adheres to tradition. There are some magii whose powers are weakened by thresholds, after all.

They eat in the half-light that Will prefers, when more is too much for sensitive senses and less brings on the horrors of the night. Lecter has brought him his own cooking, a powerful gift. Indeed, as Will eats it he can feel strength filling him, the shadows receding, or at least gathering in less obtrusive forms. The man opposite watches him eat with satisfaction, but that does not stop him from bringing up the subject of their last meeting, one that Will has no interest in discussing.

“God forbid we become friendly,” Hannibal says, and Will admits to himself his desire to know more of this man through normal means, not the cheat that his powers might offer him.

“I don’t find you that interesting,” he lies.

“You will,” Lecter replies. It is a promise truly meant. Again for the briefest moment his eyes turn from brown to red, the lustrous colour of a steak waiting for the hot pan. It’s an odd metaphor to spring to mind, but he knows instinctually that it’s the right one.

More metaphors sprout from their conversation, and Will finds himself become a teacup, and then a mongoose. He is surprised to find himself laughing – it has been a long time since he last did so. He feels oddly at ease in a way he never does around another person. What makes Hannibal Lecter so unique? So strangely charming?

When they leave the motel, as Hannibal passes the threshold, his shadow becomes strange, pulls apart into a multitude. Then it is one once more, and they are in the car and on the hunt. Will feels almost... peaceful. His belly is full and satisfied, and he feels better and stronger than he has in some time.

There is blood on his face and in his mouth. The taste is a bitter tang. The air is full of the calls of phantom crows, the rustle of feathers, the hiss of blood spurting from an artery. His hands are shaking. All of him is shaking. Hannibal’s eyes are dark pools, calm and placid and unreadable. Hannibal’s grip is tight and assured around a neck slick with blood. Will does not know what to do.

He has killed, and it was not within the memories of another’s mind. It was his own, and it felt good. Satisfying. What does that mean? What does that say about him? Is it the fault of all those others he has assimilated, has felt as if he was the killers themselves? Was it inevitable?

It seems a long time before the ambulance arrives. The house stinks of death and pain and Will is mired in it, drowning in it. His fingers clutch at Hannibal’s jacket, desperate for a life-line. The man is sure and steady. Whatever his gift or curse the aura of this room, the dead Shrike, the dying daughter, is not suffocating him as it threatens to do to Will. He hangs on and hopes for the help that finally comes.

When it is over, and the paramedics pull him out of the house, take the girl away yet living, he knows little more about the mystery that is Hannibal Lecter than he did before. Only that he was there when Will needed him, that he did not panic at the sight of human blood. That even in the horror of that moment he gave nothing away, did not foul the air with fear on top of fear. Did he fear?

No more mysteries for today. Will only wants to be clean, to wash away the blood. He is dirty, and death clings to him.

He goes home.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> I'm sure having now seen the promo for ep 3 that some of this is going to be jossed, but I can work around that somehow, even if it means going a little bit (more) AU. Hope you enjoy this chapter. The ones after will be more spaced apart, if only because I'll be writing them after each episode comes out.

He is running through a forest. It is night, and in the darkness the branches of trees reach out to grasp at him, long and sharp as claws. He breathes, heaving gasps, terrified. His flight is headlong, heedless of dangers. He must get away. There is something coming for him, something hunting him; he pants and pants and sweat drips between his shoulder-blades. The curls of his hair are damp with it and they hang down into his eyes so that he flees half-blind. His heart jack-hammers in his chest like that of a frightened rabbit.

The predator is getting closer.

Will blinks, and his dread is gone. He is hunting. Strong and sure and fast he lopes after the panicked prey, the scent of fear thick and heady. The trees seem to bend out of his way. He catches glimpses ahead, hears through sharp ears shuddering breaths, in and out and in. The prey stumbles, foot catching on the gnarled roots of the forest floor. It sobs, scrabbles around.

He closes in, circling, all escape cut off for the pathetic creature that lies down and pleads to uncaring night. It knows he is here. It whines and casts around with wild eyes. A pulse beats and flutters against the skin of its throat, so vulnerable, so tender. He licks his teeth, laps the air. He hungers.

The prey whimpers at his approach, wriggling backwards across dead leaves and dirt that hide old bones, old hunts. He darts forward and his fingers sink in, tearing open ten wounds that weep sweet blood. His teeth close around the column of a neck. Rip. His mouth is full with the taste of the kill. He draws his head back, swallowing life, and looks down.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs is staring up at him with the white eyes of the dead, where before, he knows, lay his own body, shuddering in the throes of his death.

Will wakes up shivering, cold and clammy, and it is a race to reach the bathroom before he is sick.

The vision haunts him for days. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, appearing to him again and again. No ghost or shade, it does not move, it does not speak. The Shrike, slain, in the clothes he wore

when he died torn by the entry of Will's bullets, a silent eidolon. He tried not to dwell on the dream that accompanied it that initial time. First prey, quivering and weak and waiting for the bite of sharp teeth, then the predator, vicious and cruel and the mirror of a hundred hungry minds that he has allowed himself to become over the years. Even the memory makes his stomach heave.

Garrett comes to him at the firing range, where harsh reports and the tinkle of shell casings against the floor are masked by mufflers snug over his ears. Cut-off from sound reality recedes and the darkness of visions descends. The Shrike is steady in his approach, limp and still, and the memory of blood hits his nostrils like a slap. Abigail's sobs echo in his ears as her life spurts from the nicked artery in her neck. His hands fumble for the clip on the table.

He knows it is not real, he knows that much, but still that does not stop him emptying the gun into the eidolon's chest, doing nothing, stopping nothing.

And then he wakes up. The sound of the pistol nothing more than the reflection of Crawford's rapping on the window of his car door. Another dream. Its reality fades away in the light.

Ahead is the hunting cabin, and all around the forest smells as nature ought. Earthy, natural scents. The cabin is wood, two stories. The windows are shadowed and dark. Investigators and police swarm around it with busy industry like flies to a corpse.

He crosses the threshold that has been keeping the evil and the rot inside and is met by a wave of chemical stink, the preservatives and treatments of taxidermy. It is half real, half the layered impressions of the man who spent so many hours here in his nest. Inside a deer lies on a table, stiff, enclosed in a web of chains. Heads and pelts and skulls watch from atop cabinets filled with the odour of halted decay. The Shrike, his mind, his self, rests heavy on this place. Every inch is suffused with him. He whispers through Will, seeps through the walls of the forts in his mind. Hungry and then sated. Eager, and then content. He is drawn towards the stairs, inexorably, knowing what is above.

The room is heavy with significance. With the power born of symbolism. Half a hundred and more antlers line the walls, a thicket of thorns, red with the memory of blood. The air is so thick he can hardly breathe. He forces it into his lungs, and knows the Shrike comes with it.

He hung them here, his beautiful ones. They were so soft, so innocent. How could he leave them out there in a world that is so bad? So he wrapped them up in the embrace of his trophies, lapped up their life force, disembodied them because only then would they be safe. Supped on their souls and held them close. So young, so precious. He needs them to make his life any kind of a life, needs them that he might remain sane (delusional in that, says the part of Will that is still Will). How could his little girl want to leave? The world would make her, but he is more powerful than the world. He will keep her in his heart where he can never lose her.

Images flicker one on top of another, over-exposure. Too many moments of strong emotion, too much elemental magic piled up, layered like paint. Will's eyes shutter closed, trying to take it all in. Trying not to be swept away. Here he is gorging on raw flesh, caught in an ecstasy where every bite anchors a soft spirit into his own, here a warm heart cupped in his

hands, steaming in the cold of early morning and vibrant with love and life, here the breath of young life caught in stilled lungs... too much, too much.

“Was he eating alone?” Jack’s voice cuts into him. Makes the monster shudder and slink away, back into the darkness where it belongs. “It seems a lot of work...”

“No.” Will corrects him quickly. There is only one hungry mind that has written itself into these walls. “These girls were too precious to him. He wouldn’t share their souls with anyone.”

He does not know why his own words make him quiver. A ghost of fear sliding up his throat, making his breath catch for a subtle moment. No, it is nothing. Just this room, making him nervous. The old, familiar terror that etched itself into his bones a long time ago (fear of himself, but let’s not think on that).

“You’re sure? Nobody he hunted with? Someone in a coma perhaps?”

“No, never. But if you’re so curious,” he says, offended and angry and a little surprised how much so, “send one of your dream-walkers into her head. You won’t find anything.”

No, nothing of death, nothing of murder, but there is another faint trail here. Unseen until Jack’s speculation plucked it forth into plain view. A trembling curiosity, intensity, half-pleased fear. Red as fire, cinnamon-scented. An ugly need to know.

Will kneels, reaches out to the physical to which the taint clings. A single hair, curled, and assuredly not a man’s, but not Abigail’s either. She has nothing to do with this, but another has been nosing around this nest.

He returns to his lecture hall at the Academy with the Shrike put into the past. The killer caught, his spree ended, his ‘ghost’ (he can but hope), exorcised. This is his design.

They applaud; it is not seemly. He has done nothing that is not done a thousand times over the country in fields of corn or city streets or halls of high power every week and month of the year. His particular gift is nothing to be admired – it is too terrible for that. He ducks down his head, feeling the surge of their adulation, their respect, their fear and unease and everything else in a confusing welter of emotion. Too much. It is easier when interest or boredom is the most of what he must deal with.

Today he speaks of the man he killed. Another attempt to drive away the memory of his visions, regurgitate the poisoned mind up into words and air and gone. (A lie. None of them are ever truly gone.) At least here in the Academy things have the bland palate of settled academia, nothing greater than little sips of horrors that spring from imagination more than his empathy. Equilibrium. That is what he is looking to find, that is why he came back here so soon.

So he falls back into the patterns of familiarity. The quiet darkness split only by his own voice and the single shaft of light from the projector, the soft click of the slide-changer.

Detaching himself. Imparting what he hopes is wisdom.

It is over too soon, and with it the illusion of balance.

Then there are Jack and Alana, one with warnings, the other with Eden's tainted fruit. Will knows he would take it, for the temptations of the knowledge of good and evil are his right since birth. But the price will be upsetting his equilibrium even more, bearing another delving into the cavernous depths of himself, picking him apart and judging. They would strip him of all his defences and what he is cannot bear the harsh light of day. He nurses his own wounds, and licks them closed with time not the aid of others.

They bring up his past. When fewer killers lurked inside his skull and even then the fear was great. That he would slip, fall, loose himself. As the legends say others did, who had his power. That fear did not stop him when a woman died under his hands, as his fingers slipped in wet blood and could do nothing.

"You just pulled the trigger ten times!" Crawford says, and Will sees with a sinking heart that he cannot flee this trap. Their fear of him is a mirror of his own. Jack will not see him crack and break and shatter into a monster, or into madness.

Therapy. He has no desire to be moulded into a shape seen fit by others, clay slapped over cracks that leak and seep all the same, a mere temporary solution. Will knows himself, knows that to be healthy as the world defines it would require he was not born as he was. Even if it is Hannibal Lecter who would undertake this task, who makes him curious even now.

And yet he knows he will go all the same.

Darkness has fallen when he comes to Hannibal's office. He hesitates at the door, lets his fingertips ghost just above the wood, feeling the air. It crackles with power. This is Lecter's place, his stronghold. Perhaps not as much as his home, wherever that might be, but it does not make him eager to enter. He waits there, on the cusp, until with a suddenness no less surprising for being expected the threshold opens before him and Hannibal is regarding him with quiet amusement.

"Come in Will," he says, and the invitation seems to latch onto a place underneath his sternum and tug him in, his hand falling back to his side with embarrassment. Inside the air is close and still, enveloping secrets, cradling confidences. Hannibal moves through it with sleek predator grace, his clothing no longer subdued but bold and assured. He is master of this place, and Will feels it in his bones. Yet he is oddly not uneasy.

Seeking distance he paces, looking at art and statues and the red, red walls. Like a mouth, a long throat, 'til he is cradled in the belly of the beast. His thoughts are morbid, but the subject of the night means this is not strange. Some part of him might feel devoured, but it is not unpleasant. He has come to trust Hannibal, in the huddled moments when time stilled in a bloody kitchen and all that held him together was the calmness of the man who now watches him with equally calm eyes.

“How do you want to do this?” Will asks him, with a sudden bout of edgy tension.

“In whatever way that makes you comfortable.” Hannibal allows him his space, leaning back against his desk, lustrous polished wood. Everything about him has the richness of a fine meal, of that quality of elegance America is so eager to assign to the mythology that is ‘European’. Old world, old powers. He is still not sure what Lecter’s might be.

“What would make me comfortable would be not being here at all,” he replies. There is a balcony that runs about the room, heavy with bookcases that reach the ceiling. He gestures, curiosity his excuse for an attempt to alleviate the tension between trust and disquiet that shudders somewhere deep. Hannibal nods, lets him rise up, lets him look down upon him and allows him the fiction that this is a position of power.

There is silence for some time, but pleasant. Will does not feel pressured. He appreciates that much. The noise of paper against paper is loud in the quiet, and louder still with echoes unseen the news that whatever his words (and his damage he is sure cannot be missed or mistaken) the formalities are done. Jack will have his reassurance.

It is a ploy, as all such things must be, but out in the open, which means he minds it less. Their conversation veers towards banter, despite words that sometimes dance like knives. There is an ease in talking to the man that must make him good at his job, that would command closeness even had they not bought that bonded in blood. When they talk of Abigail... is it a surprise that he should feel as Will does? Perhaps it is the surprise of his honesty. Hannibal does not seem a man to be easily open.

It does not feel like therapy, does not feel like the psychoanalysis of their first meeting. These are words between men who would be friends, and they stay with Will long after he has left. It was... less onerous than he expected.

Another dream, another vision. He has never had them so often before. The chimera stands in the dark forest, its feathers prickling and ruffled by phantom winds that do not find his skin. The stag head bows, a hoof paws the earth. Its ears flick at him.

Will follows, knowing that it wants him to. Stalks after it with predatory care, though it is not his prey. The trees grow pale, stripped of bark, wood polished and white as bone. Branches clack together like cracking knuckles. There are no stars nor moon yet light falls sickly and wan and illuminates tiny bones that snap beneath his feet.

Ahead is a thicket, and a flash of colour. The chimera noses at it, turns liquid eyes and beckons without words. Will goes to it. A bird is trapped in a cage of bare twigs like ribs, fluttering, battering its wings against its prison in futile panic. It is blue as the summer sky, and it smells sweet as flowers. He reaches out for it, slips his hand carefully between the bones of the ribcage. Catches it with sudden swift movement. He can feel its heart against his fingers. He brings it forth.

The thing that is stag and crow is watching him. He turns, meets its gaze where he could not meet a human’s. Mutely, he holds out his prize, an offering. The soft nose nuzzles at his

fingers and he opens them up. Before the bird can spread its wings a mouth of needle fangs snaps open and it is gone, save blood that seeps over animal lips.

Nine bodies in a line, nine bodies in a garden.

The wood does not at first bear the taint of death. The graves are strong with the smell of green and growing things, of tree sap and pine and leaf litter underfoot. As Will approaches he is hit by musk, rich and wild, and sweet honey fermenting into mead. This place feels feral. It does not match so tame a forest as this. Only when he is bare feet away does the rot set in. Ripe decay. It sticks in the throat.

“Black magic mushrooms?” Zeller is suggesting.

“There’s blood in the compost, aside from everything else,” Katz replies. Her spirit-fox is nosing at the tattered shade of the most recent man to die. All the others are long departed. “Animal sacrifice perhaps? He wanted to encourage them to grow.”

“Buried alive.” Zeller again. “You can’t tell me that’s not for some dark spell.”

No. It’s not quite right. The echo of the killer is here but faint, faded with time, but Will grasps it tight all the same. He feels oddly strong. The clock turns back, time flowing as he wills it. Back, back before this latest man was planted. To an open grave and a pale body breathing shallow air. To dark workings to stave off death, paying life for life. To elaborate ritual in service of... what? It remains ephemeral. Abstract.

And then. Interruption in the form of a Shrike. He gasps and blinks away the past and the echoed mind with it. The vision is gone, if it even was a vision true. He killed, murdered, has suppressed all thoughts of the meaning of that. He turns his head away and the seeming corpse grabs his arm and his heart stops in his chest.

Whatever dark spells bound him, the man does not last long once he is removed from that unhallowed place. Still it is another horror to stalk Will’s dreams at night. That and the Shrike send him running for reassurance, some odd and foreign impulse. He has never desired someone to talk to, to confess to, but still he finds himself back with Hannibal in the closeness of his office. (Womb-like, his brain throws up for a second, then quickly dismisses. No, that is not it at all.)

Stress, that is the answer, but his other conclusions Will likes less. Hobbs is dead and gone and must be forgotten save the mirror of himself he leaves in Will’s skull to join the countless others. He cannot think of him as victim. He cannot allow himself to contemplate himself as even the barest shadow of the terrors that lie nestled within him. Denial must be his path until he once more finds his feet.

So he lies, refutes a thrill. Whether it convinces he is unsure. Still the subject is changed, another killer explored. They fall into the pattern that is slowly becoming established

between them, and with measured words Hannibal helps him see. Connection. Connection. That is the power that drives this stranger. That is his design.

Sugars and medicine and missing persons lead them to their farmer Eldon Stammets, but when they get there he is moments gone. Tipped off by a crime website that knows more than it ought, knows *him*, which is the worst of it. He feels suddenly exposed, raw and twitching. Saving a life of one who would have been next to die and spread through soil and fungus is a good that cannot be denied, but their quarry is fled and the trail grows cold.

The journalist must be dealt with too, but not by him. This is Crawford's work, and Will cannot intimidate or bind with craft as he can. No, he returns to his bedside vigil, guarding Abigail against some unspoken threat he does not know, scrabbling for peace within himself forever out of reach. He sleeps and he waits and he sleeps again, and nothing changes. Nothing is any clearer.

He has left for sustenance and is returning when he receives the call. Adrenaline spikes and fear rises with it. His pistol is in his hand before he knows it; he runs, leaps to the chase. She is gone, but it cannot have been for long and so he does not allow himself to think what will happen if he fails, only that he must hunt.

Hunt he does and then... it would be so easy to shoot again, and again and again as he did before but he stops himself. Does not want to go down that dark route. But no. He has questions and they are answered and the echo of the man before him that lurks in his head finally matches up with its twin. He knows and he understands.

Stammets lives and is incarcerated awaiting trial, but the case still leaves him unsettled. He visits Hannibal again. Their conversations restore some small measure of clarity, some measure of balance. Perhaps it is only an illusion, but he would prefer not to think so.

"It's the inevitability of there being a man so bad that killing him felt good," Hannibal tells him. It is not the statement itself Will disagrees with, but to acknowledge it would be – for him – the first step in a long line that leads to a monster. Aloud, he makes his excuses. Pleads justice.

And Hannibal picks it apart to quest after the truth. They claim the truth sets you free. For others perhaps the truth is healthy, but for himself he fears it. The unspeakable. 'Beautiful?' Perhaps, but terrible as well.

He is reaching out, he knows, in a way so utterly unlike him. Seeking a paddle to traverse deep waters, and that paddle is this man, because... because he is in the boat with him, and has been since Abigail. The act of killing has set Will more adrift than ever he has been before, and thus he forces himself to admit that perhaps this time he cannot navigate his way out alone.

So he confesses his crime. “I liked killing Hobbs.” A hushed whisper, even in this room of secrets. It makes him shudder in his fear. One step. But one step, and who knows where the road might lead. He can barely pay heed to the other man’s words so caught is he in terror of himself.

“God dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas whilst they sang a hymn,” Hannibal tells him in parable. (He means the Judeo-Christian God. There are other powers, other gods, more certain to gift rewards, and yet people remain fond of this one.)

“Did God feel good about that?” Will asks him.

“He felt powerful.”

It is the truth and it makes Will tremble.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> This turned out to have more weirdly incestuous Will/Abigail undertones than I meant it to...

Never have the dreams and visions been so constant in their presence, so unrelenting in their intensity. Will feels as though he is walking through life in a haze of insomnia, of unreality, where the events that haunt his sleep have equal weight with those that happen in the waking world. His thoughts detach, he holds himself above and apart. The ghosts and psyches of those around him are laid bare and it is hard to look away. His empathy is laid open like a raw nerve, and eyes are more of a trap than they have ever been. When he looks down his hands are stained with blood, old and brown and flaking from his nails and knuckles. Water washes away nothing.

Autumn is coming along but the nights are still warm, or perhaps it is just that that is the way he experiences them. Faint and foreign emotions whisper along the outside of his thoughts, murderers long since killed or caught. He would not say that his sessions with Hannibal Lecter have had no effect, but the truth is he feels more unstable than ever. It is nothing psychoanalysis and the subtle manipulations of therapy can fix. This is something deeper, written into his marrow.

He takes himself off several nights a week to the Academy library, between hospital trips and visiting Hannibal and preparing for his lectures, breathing in the mouldering scent of old almanacs and grimoires and encyclopaedias of the arcane. Half-way towards absorbing knowledge through the air alone. His kind of power is rare enough that there is but sparse information to be found, but what little there is he devours, charting descents that strip away sanity, of personalities that flutter and change with the vagaries of the wind, of constant, aching *openness*.

The tall stacks of the shelves slowly become the high boles of trees, the leaves of books turning to leaves in truth. Will stands, pushes his chair back and it and the desk are gone. It is quiet here, as always. It might almost be peaceful if he could be sure it could be trusted, that it did not augury something terrible. If it did not have the uncomfortable certainty of obsession.

The stag with its halo of bristling feathers is not alone. A slender doe naps at grass as dark as blood at night, and her ears twitch as she notices him. Yet she does not run, merely raises her head and looks to him with clear human eyes and a white throat ringed in splattered crimson.

Will looks down. He is in hunter’s camouflage, and he is holding a knife.

Home for the weekend, he pays the local town girl who comes up to feed his dogs, clears out the fridge of wasted, rotting food, finds a Tupperware of Hannibal's leftovers that still smells good for all that it has lain there a week. He does not risk it, although some odd and reckless part of him is tempted. In mid-day sun things seem less surreal, but shadows still linger around corners, and the night is never far away. The air in the garden smells of fallen leaves. This is a less savage forest than the one that haunts his dreams, but the echo of a form is yet cousin to the form itself. Plato. The cave. Remnants of odd turns of conversation with the ever-knowledgeable Dr. Lecter. They have talked of other things than the vagaries of his own psychology.

The next morning he is visited early by Alana Bloom, who is one of the few he counts amongst his friends. She has the distinction in the exalted ranks of those commonly called upon by the FBI of having no powers, no strange magics clinging to her skin. It is a relief he did not realise he craved so much to speak to someone without the constant cloying of their abilities filling the air between them. She reaches down to pet the crowd of his dogs that snuffle around her, greets him with a cheery smile. She is unexpected, but he is glad to see her all the same.

Still, he is in nothing but shirt and boxers, the clothes he sleeps in. Bad enough that his powers begin to seep through cracks in the walls of his forts without physical and still symbolic half-nakedness. He turns back to the house for something more appropriate, offers coffee as guest-right. Then she surprises him with the delivery of unexpected news.

Abigail Hobbs has awoken. He wonders if Jack ever did send a dream-walker into her sleeping head, if perhaps it was by his design that she rose from slumber. There are ways, though never certain. He does not know how he feels, how he ought to feel. He orphaned her, could not even save her – that was Hannibal's work, not his. He cannot count up the debt he owes her, has no idea how he could even attempt to make amends.

"You want me to get you a cup of coffee?" Alana asks. She is concerned for him, of course she is. At times he feels as though he is barely holding on, and yet does not take to the delicacy most show him. Hannibal's calm acceptance is easier to bear.

"No," he replies, "I want to get my coat." He wants to go to her, to sit by her bedside and know what it is she would have of him, to give her whatever she wants, and everything he is capable of giving.

"Let's have a cup of coffee." This is not Alana as therapist, or at least *she* does not think so. He does not have to meet her eyes to read that much. She offers friendship, attempting stability. It will not be enough. He has a deep and unfathomable maelstrom inside of him, locked behind high walls and iron doors and bars thick as trees. She is not large enough, not heavy enough, to be his anchor. An anchor will find no purchase inside his head. He is a coracle battered on an ocean, and it is Hannibal's paddle he needs.

Coffee is... awkward. Could be nothing else. Crawford rings the house, then his mobile, then sends a raven made of shadows to caw his name at the window before Alana shuts it firmly out. Perhaps he worries Will is already on his way to Abigail's side. He should be, he would

be, given a choice. Too hot, his drink turns to ashes in his mouth, tastes of dirt and bitterness and the grave.

“Jack wants you to go see her,” Alana explains, which is not as he would have thought. But then, of late Jack Crawford has seemed less concerned with his sanity, heeding only the chase, the things Will might do for him. Is this preferable? Knowing what is behind it, acknowledging it, perhaps so. Were things different, were *he* different, he would like better Alana’s care, the honest friendship she is trying to offer him. But he is all sharp edges, thorned for his own protection. He cannot find it in him to let her close.

As a buffer though, as she suggests, the calm and neutral space she can offer him... that is better, and he says so. Jack’s confidence in Abigail’s complicity is a subtle poison to his own mind, a wrongness that makes his power shout out ‘no’, that Jack is wrong, could not *be* more wrong. And right now he needs distance between himself and Jack, for talking may be one thing, but what he wants to offer Abigail is of far more significance than that.

“Abigail Hobbs has no-one,” he says.

Alana looks at him and he flickers his eyes down and away. “You can’t be her everyone.” She is gentle in saying it, but still it hurts. So does her comparison – Abigail is no stray to be collected, no further guardian to watch over his sleep and his nightmares. He owes it to her to give himself over, and if it is his companionship that she desired, that that is what she will have.

But Alana is right. His face, his significance (killer, murderer, monster) may be too much at first. He would not force his presence upon her if it will only make things worse. Is he foolish, thinking she will even want to see him, her father’s killer? That he could ever bring her anything but pain?

Let Alana see her first. He will come to her when she is ready for him.

Another vision makes itself manifest in the wake of his uncertainty. No longer bathed in moonlight but the bright, bright light of the sun all is drenched in amber as sticky as sap. Fallen leaves crunch fresh underfoot, and he walks in step with the girl who is cradled inside the circle of his arms. They are hunting. Hunting what? He does not care. All he knows is love, and love means possession. The knife in his hand caresses the tall, white column of a throat, his little girl’s throat.

“Shhh, shhh,” he whispers as she trembles. The deer are watching them, chimerical stag, blood-soaked doe. His palm sweats against polished wood. She is so special, his child, his beautiful daughter, and soon she will know the truth and she will hate him. The world wants her, covets her, works to take her away from him. He will not let it.

He breathes. The knife flashes, and there is blood, a torrent, a great arterial gush hot against his hands and painting the air like a fluttering flag. His baby slackens, leans against him and he hugs her close, sobbing. She is his, she is his.

She is his.

Another day, another lecture, another pass over recent acts, recent crimes, recent failures. Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead and his blood drips and dries, insinuates itself under Will's skin and he carefully does not think upon his latest dreams. He has always drawn those lessons he gives from his own experience, from his triumphs (pyrrhic, every time), from his mistakes. Jack had mentioned in passing the copycat they are still searching for, asked that he recruit half a hundred new perspectives in the persons of his students. The copycat who still puzzles Will, whose symbolism of stag and crow now haunt his dreams, who offered him up a dead woman like a gift.

He has just come to the image of that field, that piece of personalised theatre, when Jack and Hannibal appear upon the periphery. They wait for him to finish, and so he obliges. Explains the traces of mind and soul he sucked up under the sun, fixed between gold and deep blue sky. Lets the tiny morsel of it waft up to the back of his mind and pulls from it, tastes superiority like fine wine, disdain and sadistic hunger like spice. Explains artistry. Curiosity, kinship, connection. Draws plain the outlines of his latest theory, the conjuncture that – backed by his power – feels *right*. Who else on the phone, who else to set Hobbs off, who else to bring things crashing down?

As the words leave his mouth he knows they are true. Feels it in the shudder of the echo of a psychopath's mind, painting itself over the inside of his head in a moment like the flash of a camera. His empathy has caught the scent of this man, and things take on the cast of the inevitable.

Finally he is going to visit Abigail, and he is afraid. Afraid of himself, of the spectre of her father trapped in his head, that it will colour all his dealings with her. He is well aware how it might appear, the temptation to set himself up as surrogate, the echo and mirror of another man. But greater than the fear is the need to see her.

Hannibal is with him, which is a relief. He is calm, he is controlled, and Will needs that now more than ever. All the more so when he opens the door to see a red-haired woman perched on the edge of Abigail's bed with poisoned words dripping from her mouth. She knows him and the way she speaks... Freddie Lounds. Who else?

She calls him insane and the dark, black pit inside him opens up like a maw, spewing whispers and blood and a hundred angry voices screaming for her death. He feels hot, and heavy, and murderous. Protective. She is touching something that is *his*. He meets her eyes now, because he is not behind his own, nothing is but empty space. His mirrors are turned away, reflecting the past, not the present. He hesitates. It feels like a long time.

Sanity exerts itself upon him. It is a struggle to speak rather than snarl, but speak he does. "Would you excuse us?" As much a threat as a request. Still not entirely in his own control. Introduces himself to Abigail. "I'm Special Agent Will Graham."

“By Special Agent he means not really an agent,” Lounds says, taunting again, not knowing or not caring what she threatens to wake inside him. He is horrified at himself, distantly, from far off. His own mind swims fitfully in a torrent made from the scraps of others and none of them have any space for morals or mercy. He is barely keeping his head above water. “He didn’t get past the screening process. Too unstable.”

Perhaps it is that ugly truth that does it. Lets him surface, gasping for air, find his feet and let the dark red waters ebb away to the deeps where they belong. Lounds is wearing black, he notices, but more than that she is cloaked in shadows that cling in close. She has a power too. Shadow-walker. No wonder she has such an easy time poking her nose where it does not belong.

“I really must insist you leave the room.” Hannibal’s voice helps too, grounding him. Makes him remember he is not alone here, not left to face this amoral vulture without support.

And then she is gone, and he is himself once more, though off balance, teetering. He does not quite tear his glasses from his face with the haste he wants but he cannot bear to see clearly, not right now. Anything but that. Anything but what just happened, which cannot *be* when this is about Abigail and what he must do for her. He has killed her father; he must not *become* her father like some doppelganger with a stranger’s face.

Hannibal suggests a walk, and yes, the fresh air can only help to wipe away the tremors that shudder inside of him, the monstrous potential that came all too close to reality. There is a conservatory here rich with green and growing things, with life to counteract the stench of death that hangs all too close around the three of them. He tries to offer up what comforts he can, knows they are worth little. Abigail seems... shocked into detachment. Pulling back from the terrors of that day. He cannot blame her. For now, it’s as good a mechanism as any.

They have a kinship, him and her. A kind born from fear, of becoming that which they stood too close to. Of the terrors night holds. Of the ugliness of murder (the ugliness that stains him and has ever since the first killer’s mind he ever felt). What words of his can help assuage that?

She wants to go home.

Outside Ms Lounds is lurking. She offers up reconciliation, and perhaps in her world the things she has done truly are forgivable, but he has no forgiveness of offer her. Even if she had not called him insane (and even if he did not at times fear it for the truth), she dragged his demons to the surface and that is something he can never forgive. Even now she seems all threat, all poison under a sugar shell, and what can he do but offer back threats in kind, as foolish as it might be. He does not hate her (is trying desperately not to hate he for that is not who he wants to be), but he does fear her. And although he is used to dealing with fear, it makes his tongue more loose than wisdom would advise.

He does not need the proof of it after the fact to realise it was a mistake. He knew that the moment the words had left his lips and a smile had curved minutely onto hers. Still he takes Jack’s rebuke, and knows it deserved. Thankfully the point is not belaboured and they move

on to other things. To Abigail, and her wishes. To her home, and trauma revisited, and Hannibal's stated hope that it may heal her.

The atmosphere at the house is heavy with the stink of fear and blood and hate. Epithets and wards against evil and charms of casting out are painted in shaking hands across walls and doors. Abigail is trembling, but still she approaches, faces the spot of her mother's death that lays heavy with the spoor of panic and anguish. She remains detached, and he worries for her.

The cleaners have been inside, trying to scrape the air clean of its violent vestigium. The air smells like incense but it has cleansed nothing, merely covered it up. The memories lurk underneath, written onto the world as a stylus writes upon soft wax. Boxes of belongings, photographs turned to the wall so the images cannot look out upon strangers and invaders.

"You do this a lot?" Abigail asks. "Go places and think about killing?"

"Too often." Each time piles straw upon straw and one day that might be one straw too many. But how can he stop doing it when lives might be saved by his actions? He puts it into the only words he can, another fitful attempt that only echoes many that have come before. Shadows suspended upon dust. It is too calm for the passion that really takes him over in those moments. He does not want her to ask more deeply. Does not want to wake the echo of her father.

He still has to explain something though. The desperation of the end. The caller, the copycat. But she knows nothing of that particular mystery. Perhaps it is for the best. She should be able to put this behind her as soon as possible, leave the darkness of this world and return to the light.

They move on. Flick through boxes for this and that she may want to take home and keep. Discuss delusions, evidence. It is not... comfortable. Will is not at all sure how helpful this can be for her. The ghosts of the life she can never return to cluster in the air like smoke, choking. It leaves him awkward and on edge. It is not as though that is anything new.

They are surprised by a neighbourhood friend, and the three of them let her go outside to talk. It is less close out there, and outside support, someone Abigail knew before all of this who was not simply brought into the equation by chance and blood, is likely to be more helpful than anything they can do. And perhaps it would have been, if not for the boy in the woods or the skittish, frightened mother who both lay blame where it does not belong.

The shards of Abigail's reality cut into everything. Her father has changed her world, and Will fears that nothing he can do or say will repair what has been done. Time, time is all he can hope for to heal what might be healed and put things right.

They return to the cabin the next day. Little has changed since the last time Will was here, at least on the outside. Its interior has been gutted, animals and tools and chemicals taken away into evidence. All that remains is the antler room upstairs, the last to go. The press of

emotions that layer the air have subsided a little, but it is so strong it will take years to fade. Of such things as this are hauntings made, attracting restless spirits with no-where else to go.

Abigail's voice is soft as she talks. Memories of utility, of her father crafting this and that alone in respect of those he killed, human and animal both. Will can feel it beneath his skin. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who will not sink down into the darkness and be subsumed and neutralised like all who have come before.

When she speaks aloud her realisation, the shared cannibalism, it creates a strange duality of his horror and Hobb's pleasure. Sharing strength, sharing secrets and precious things. What better way to show his love than that? He knows it to be true. That is what happened. It turns his stomach.

There are two psychiatrists in the room, two experts of behavioural psychology. What does he have to give to answer her fears, her guilt? He has empathy, he has understanding of her father, but none of it is helpful, none of it will sooth her. He feels entirely impotent, useless.

Then. Blood. Dripping between floorboards overhead.

He climbs the stairs two at a time and there she is. The girl, stripped and displayed. The copycat struck again and it is not *right*. It does not *fit*. What game is he playing with them? He can feel him here, quiet and satisfied, but his design is opaque and obscured. Will's empathy stretches out in all direction grasping for the edges of his psychology and returns mere impressions. He slips and slides away from deeper understanding.

But before he can try any harder he must do what needs to be done. He calls Crawford.

Crawford is less than pleased. There mere fact that this exists seems to spell out that Will was wrong, that he has failed. Yet how can that be possible? His powers do not lie. He does not understand it. He cannot explain it. And yet there it is. His mistake.

Is this man's mind truly so slippery that it is immune to him?

Hannibal believes it to be the brother. Everything in him screams that this is not the case, but the physical denies him. Evidence speaks, and even a power such as his must bow before it. Crawford throws accusations, emanates anger. Will flinches before him, and makes sense of nothing.

Hannibal is sent to ensure Abigail's safety. Crawford leaves to take care of other business. Will... Will is left alone with a puzzle he cannot solve and the ache of doubt in his heart.

He is lost enough in dreams and visions without the uncertainty of this. What is he to do now?

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